

An excerpt from *Hard Time*, ©Cara McKenna

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This excerpt contains sexual content and is intended for persons 18 and older.

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The rest of my day would be a partial repeat of the morning—Literacy Basics and Resources, back to back. The former was tense.

Fuses were short in Cousins, and no one was eager to look stupid in front of a twentysomething woman or a roomful of their worst enemies, struggling to sound out words like *bucket* and *ocean* and *seagull*. There were meltdowns—frustrated, self-hating flashes reminiscent of the kids I'd helped decipher these same letters. These men needed my help, wanted my help. Resented my help.

I could feel the tension flash and simmer now and then, like ripples of heat shimmering above hot asphalt. It kept me on edge. Even kept my mind off inmate 802267 for a time.

Until an hour later, when I suddenly found myself face-to-face with him.

Leland had been right—the afternoon block of Resources was more popular than the morning, and it was twice as long. There were lots of inmates and only one of me, and I could taste the collective impatience as I chose at random whom to help next.

I was quizzing a younger guy for his upcoming GED test, when a tall figure came through the door. I knew who it was without even raising my eyes. Broad shoulders and slim hips, long legs. Overgrown dark hair. Eyes hot enough to singe.

*Fuck.*

Why was I even so freaked out? 802267 looked no more or less threatening than any of the other men, so it had to be intuition . . . Except he put me on alert one level deeper than mere fear. Made me feel warm and unnerved and restless in a way I didn't trust at all. A way I wasn't used to. A hunger I hadn't been dogged by in years.

He strolled between the tables to a free chair on the largely black side of the room, earning hostile glares as he took a seat. He had no papers or books with him, just sat there with his fingers linked atop the table, patient as could be.

He reserved me with his stare, his silence telling me, *I'll be right here, waiting.*

Others had been angling for my attention for some time, and I was happy to avoid him for forty minutes or more. And still he simply sat there, hands clasped, eyes following me. I came around to him toward the end of the two-hour block, crossing the floor with my heart pounding. I was wheeling a chair everywhere I went, and I pushed it up to the end of his long table, smiling as I took a seat kitty-corner to him.

“You’ve been awful patient. Can I help you with something?”

Nearly a smile. Nearly. His voice was deep. Low. Rich and dark as spring soil. “I hope so.”

“So do I. Shoot.”

“I don’t write too well.”

“Okay.”

“I’ve tried the literacy classes before, but they weren’t much help.”

“No?”

“I already know all that kindergarten bull, about sounding shit out. I read all right, but my writing’s shit. I have to think about every damn letter like it’s the first time I’ve ever seen it. Dyslexia or whatever.”

“Actually, that sounds like dysgraphia.”

“Like what?”

“It’s like a cousin of dyslexia. You can read just fine, you said?”

He nodded once, like a cowboy or something. The way he never took his eyes off my face made me antsy. Squirmy all over. I prayed he couldn’t tell. “I read okay. Not fast, but a couple books a week.”

“But you find the letters difficult to form, when you sit down to write something?”

“I can copy them just fine, but they don’t stay in my head. Not all of them, anyhow.”

“Yeah, that’s dysgraphia.” Dear God, why had he not been diagnosed by first or second grade? What

chance did a kid stand in a school system like that? “Would you like to make a plan for working with your challenges?”

“If you’ve got one.”

“Well, I know this isn’t the ideal place for it, but many people with your challenge find that typing makes writing a lot easier, once they get used to the keyboard. Do you have much of a computer background?”

“No. But that’s true—it’s way easier to type. I can find letters way quicker than I can remember how to make them myself.”

“Great. If you come to Resources again next Friday, I’ll bring some worksheets and literature about dysgraphia. And maybe you could let me watch you write a little, and that way I can see exactly where it is we’re starting from. Sound okay?”

Another dip of his stubble-black chin. “That sounds all right.”

With a vivid flash, I tried to picture him on the outside. How he dressed. Baggy jeans or snug ones, leather jacket or a plaid button-up, some freebie shirt with a beer logo on it . . . ? What kind of work had he done before he got incarcerated? Physical? Or were those hard, tanned arms a byproduct of this place, of this existence with its bottomless wells of boredom and danger?

Another inmate interrupted my stupor.

“Hey! Tick tock, library lady. I been waitin’ over an hour here.”

I opened my mouth to assure him he’d be next, but 802267 spoke before I could. He whipped his head around and caught the guy in the coldest beam of disgust you ever saw.

“You see a number on her shirt?” he demanded.

“What you—”

802267 sat up real straight. “Cause I don’t. And since she hasn’t got a number on her shirt, I guess that means she doesn’t *have* to be here. So treat the lady with some respect, since she’s been nice enough to show up and pretend to give a fuck about your incarcerated ass.”

The chastised man pushed his chair out with a squeal and headed for the door, muttering. 802267

turned back to me, posture relaxing. “Where were we?”

“Right,” I said, face burning. “You come back next week, and I’ll come prepared to help.”

“Deal.”

I paused before adding, gently, “I do give a fuck, incidentally.”

He cracked a smile, making me feel a more southerly persuasion of flustered.

I was poised to rise, but his stare nailed me in place—from cool to broiling in a breath. He spoke quietly. Like we were engaged in a conspiracy.

“I like how you talk.”

“Oh.” I swallowed, cheeks and neck burning red-hot. “Th-thank you.”

“Where you from?”

“South Carolina.”

“I never met anybody from South Carolina.” His voice was deep and resonant, and it required no volume to command my attention. He spoke with a tone that was threat, coercion, seduction, lament. All at once. *I never met anybody from South Carolina.* The way he said it, anything could have come next.

*I never met anybody from South Carolina . . .*

*. . . but I love bluegrass.*

*. . . but I stabbed a man to death in Tennessee.*

*. . . but I hear the girls there taste like peaches.*

“What’s the weather like there?” he asked.

“Nice,” I said stupidly, nodding. Terrified. Hypnotized. “Real nice.”

His gaze dropped from my eyes to my mouth, the weight of it as real as a kiss. His own lips were parted, the lower one looking full and flushed.

“Real hot summers,” he said.

“Pretty hot.” I swallowed again, parched. “Sometimes.”

“I miss summers. On the outside.”

“I’m sure.”

“Miss beer. Swimming in the lake. Feeling my hair dry in the sun.”

He parceled out his thoughts in tiny bites, keeping me hungry, dying to taste whatever came off that tongue next.

“I’m sure you do,” I offered.

“Miss lots of things.” He said it low, each letter dripping molasses, thick with black, sticky-sweet intentions.

This man . . . maybe he couldn’t write, but he spoke volumes with a few murmured words.

The officer’s voice broke in with a bark. “Collier. Back it up.” 802267 obediently sat up straight. *Collier*. His body heat went with him.

Our elbows had been almost near enough to touch, faces close enough to whisper secrets. And wasn’t that what he’d been doing? Had I been whispering back? I couldn’t even say who’d brought us so near. I could only tell you I hadn’t pulled away. And that made exactly two men in the world whose nearness I didn’t shrink from—Collier and my daddy.

“I better move on before the session’s over,” I said, attention on his hands. On those fingers still linked so benignly. Then his eyes. “I’ll see you next week, if you want the help.”

“It’s a date.”

I stood and wheeled my chair away, risking only the quickest glance. But that was all it took to braise my body anew in his weird, scary heat. I scanned for the nearest expectant face, so woozy I could’ve been drunk.

I felt it when Collier was gone, like quenching cool rolling in on the heels of a summer storm, deepening my lungs and welcoming my sanity back.

\* \* \*

That man haunted me.

I revisited our interaction a hundred times that weekend, shocked and ashamed he’d managed to get so close. That it had taken a guard posted twenty feet away to spot it, when I’d been sitting right there, close enough to smell his skin.

*That's his way*, I imagined. A charmer by design. If I wasn't careful, he'd find out the names of my parents or friends and have me muling drugs for him inside a month. That was how extortion worked. On TV, anyhow.

But the thing that threw me most about the incident was the way it elevated a long-held suspicion of mine to blinding truth—I was attracted to bad men.

One abusive boyfriend and a consumptive insta-lust for an inmate who'd done Lord knew what to get put away . . . That was only two offenses, but it was also *plenty*. I couldn't trust my libido any more than I could Collier. Both had to be approached like the dangerous creatures they were.

I tried to drape my obsession under a practical veil. On Monday I rooted through the library's dusty basement, finding what I was after. I made a phone call to Cousins, and after being transferred to three different personnel, I was connected to the warden herself. I made a request, and it was granted. And the next Friday I arrived lugging a heavy case, its pebbled plastic turned brittle by age and dust. After my morning strip search with Shonda, I set the case with a *thunk* on the reception desk in front of Ryan.

"I got permission from the warden to bring this in for inmate 802267."

He eyed the case, opened its latches. "All right, then. I'll send it on up the chain, and hopefully it'll get where it's going in the next day or two."

As Shonda and a male officer escorted me through the long dayroom, I wasn't nearly as scared as the week before. I got stares, a few noises and murmurs of sexual interest, and a cheerful, "Hey, Ms. Goodhouse!" from Wallace. I couldn't remember all the protocol, but I was fairly sure greeting him back was a violation of some rule or other, so I kept my eyes forward and my mouth shut.

I was feeling as confident as could be hoped, until we passed the central booth. Beyond it lay the white inmates' territory, and among them sat Collier, just as I'd anticipated. Same table.

*Same seat*, I thought, and the same game of cards, though someone else was shuffling. He watched me, and I watched him. Though to *watch* someone really requires that they be doing something, and he wasn't, so I suppose technically I *stared* at him.

I *wanted* to stare at him. I wanted to study him without anybody seeing, pore over this man who

affected me like none had before. He'd come to me in dreams every night that week, those arms and hands and that low voice, and those brown eyes like devil's food batter.

I'd had my share of crushes—I was twenty-seven, after all—and I'd been with a few guys. I'd been infatuated, if not to the extent some of my girlfriends from back home seemed to get. Not until now. I knew exactly why.

*He's a terrible man.* He must be, if he was locked up here, among inmates whose crimes were robbery, assault, major drug offenses, rape, manslaughter. Given that menu, I'd be rooting for robbery, and that was pathetic. He was a bad man, no doubt. One who deserved reform, but not my desire.

*And he's a prisoner—that's the other reason.* That was why I wanted him. Because he was untouchable, the very urge impossible. *Because he's dangerous, but this crush—if that's what it was—is safe.* Because my ear had healed and my bruises had faded, but my heart was still too skittish to invite anything real.

What my body felt for him, though, that *was* real. This attraction positively hounded me. Those dreams. And I'd fantasized about him, too, just the briefest, most intense snatches of contact. Of his mouth on my neck and his words steaming my skin. *I like the way you talk.* What else would he say, if he got me alone?

*I like the way you—*

“Better this time?” Shonda asked, unlocking the door that led to the administrative wing. I'd barely registered leaving the orange zone, when last week I'd been practically gasping to escape it.

“Way better, thanks. The uncertainty's not so bad now, you know?”

“I do. Have a good one, Anne.”

“You, too.”

The morning sessions went well enough. A couple of minor outbursts, but nothing a bark from the attending CO couldn't shut down. I delivered a copy of *My Side of the Mountain* to an inmate who'd requested it the week before. It had been his favorite when he was young, and he wanted to read it now, to try to remember what it felt like to be his son's age. They didn't visit, he'd said—his son and ex-

girlfriend. He hadn't seen the kid since he was four. The request touched me, and I handed the paperback over like I was giving him a bar of gold, more determined than ever to avoid hearing what these men were in for.

Drug possession and theft didn't scare me too badly—those seemed impersonal. Forgivable acts of desperation. But if I heard a guy I'd begun to feel invested in was locked up for domestic violence or sexual assault, or for abusing a child . . . There was a vast difference between helping someone uncover their potential, and knowing what they were *capable* of. And if I had to contend with the latter, I couldn't do my job.

I took my lunch break in the office, eating a turkey sandwich as I stared out the window at the exercise yard. It was bordered on three sides by the four-story prison. I was tucked into one of the corners, two floors up and perhaps thirty feet back from the area where the men did their calisthenics, beyond chain link capped with coils of concertina wire.

No Collier. Not at first. But as I bit into my apple, an air horn sounded and all the men funneled out of the yard. A minute later, the next group spilled in. And my eyes found him as easily as a compass finds north.

He moved in a small pack of fellow white inmates, breaking off as they headed for a set of bleachers and continuing on alone in my direction. A handful of black guys were already getting to work on the sparse equipment, and he strode right on up to them. Exchanged a curt nod with the biggest of the group, securing some permission I'd never understand. He stripped his shirt, tossing it in a ball on the dry, brown grass.

And he was beautiful.

His body shocked the very breath out of me. Tan and strong and fucking *cut*.

*Of course he is. What else is there to do?* His powerful shoulders tapered to a trim waist, every inch of him looking carved and honed and dangerous, a tall, strong frame wrapped elegantly in muscle and skin. I felt things I thought I'd only ever dreamt, it had been so long. Hunger, between my legs. Urgency heating every ounce of my coursing blood. He dropped to bang out a couple dozen push-ups, and Lord

help me, I imagined my body beneath his pumping one. My hand rose, palm pressing the cool glass. Seeking him. I snatched it back.

It was different, watching him like this—with him not watching me in return. With the fear removed, all I felt was the fascination. His loose pants hung about his hips, revealing a sliver of gray. It shone against his tan skin like silver.

*Boxers or briefs?* I wondered, unsure if the prisoners even got to choose.

He had tattoos on his back and one shoulder, but I couldn't make them out. Like his sentence, I probably didn't want the details. Didn't want to squint and find evidence of his crime, or spot a swastika.

*Or see a woman's name written in cursive inside a heart.*

No, not that, either. I could admit it. And as I did, I backed away from the window.

Part of me wondered if he'd even show this afternoon, for our little study session. I wasn't stupid. I knew what a man wanted when he stared the way Collier did. He just wanted to be close to me—to a woman. Close enough smell me, or scare me, or seduce me. Couldn't tell you which. Didn't care to know. All at once I hoped he wouldn't show for Resources or Book Discussion. I *feared* he wouldn't show. I feared too much about him, both his nearness and his absence.

I didn't spot him as the men shuffled in for Book Discussion a half hour later, but that didn't mean a thing. It was a big group. And my body was ringing, a tuning fork vibrating on what was fast becoming a familiar frequency.

My mouth went dry, but fuck it. I plunged into the next chapter.

When it wrapped I asked the room if someone else would like to read the next one, someone with a strong, projecting voice. I got a couple of volunteers, and picked Wallace. The guy certainly wasn't lacking in showmanship, plus if he was reading, I'd be spared his smart remarks. He didn't speak with the finest grammar, but he read quite well, sitting in my seat before the audience. I stood by, making the odd note to myself about what prompts to use to spark a conversation.

I didn't want to pull the men from the story by looking around the room too much while the others read, so I kept my eyes glued to neutral places—my notes, the floor at the foot of the front row, a blank

stretch of wall. That was my excuse, anyway. Really I just didn't want to know if Collier was there. Or more specifically, I didn't want the sensation in my chest confirmed. Didn't want to spot him and realize it was true—something inside me was tuned to him. Primed to rouse when he was close. And I felt roused, then. Charged.

The discussion began, quickly growing heated. It was what I'd hoped for, choosing this book—that they'd get engaged—but it still kept me on edge. I didn't yet understand the bounds of their feelings, and what impulses lay beyond.

“If he don't go after her,” one man said on the topic of Nailer seeking revenge on Sloth, “then this world ain't got no rules. They boss don't give a shit. Ain't no cops to give a shit. No consequences—”

“She got consequences,” another cut in. “She got nothin' now. The book said so, basically, how she'd have to sell her body and shit.”

“Hands,” I reminded them, back in the reader's seat, legs crossed. “That's an interesting point, about how there's no real authority where Nailer is. The author's implied that maybe elsewhere in the world, it's still civilized. Where the wealthy people live. Any thoughts on that? Yes.” I called on a man in the back.

He began to reply, but I suddenly couldn't hear him. Because just to his left sat Collier.

Collier in his navy tee, with his hot-tar eyes. I stared at him, he stared at me.

Could he tell I was staring at him? Was I far enough away that maybe, just maybe, it looked like I was rapt by his neighbor's analysis?

Silence, and I'd not heard what the man had said. Not a word.

“Interesting,” I bluffed. “Responses?” I called on someone sitting very far away from Collier, and gave him my full attention.

The block ended shortly and I smiled as the men shuffled out. Unable to resist, I watched Collier go. I wanted to know what he'd do as he reached the door, and I found out, to my own peril. He was looking at me. Straight at me. Cross hairs. And then it was his entire body aimed my way, cutting through the draining crowd, coming for me. He shot the guard a look, getting a nod of permission. He stopped a

couple paces from me, hands in his pockets.

I smiled to cover my anxiety. I had the strangest feeling he knew that I'd watched him, an hour earlier. Watched his bare body in the sunshine, toiling in the yard.

"Good afternoon," I offered, and any authority my voice had assumed during the session fled, my words going reedy.

"Hey. I got that thing you brought."

"Oh, that was quick." Fuck, I could smell him. Summer and sweat. I wanted to lick his neck and taste the salt on his skin.

"What is it?" he asked. "A typewriter?"

"Kind of. It's a word processor. It's about a million years old, but I thought you might want to use it, to practice your writing."

"Does it need paper?"

"It takes it, but I doubt they still make ribbons for those things. You can just use the little screen—it'll show you what you're typing. You'll see when you plug it in. *If* you plug it in. You don't have to use it if you don't want to." I was babbling.

"No outlets in the cells."

"Oh, crap." Of course there weren't.

"But I'll see about using it in the media room or wherever."

"Collier," said the guard. "Let's go."

"Thanks," he murmured to me. "I'll see you later, for that help we talked about. And I got a question for you."

My stomach gurgled and my mouth couldn't form a reply quick enough. He was gone, big frame slipping through the door, and all at once I could breathe again.

A question for me? There were so many I yearned to ask in return.

*What do you want to do with your life, when you get out? Are you ever getting out? What are you like, out in the world? How do you dress? What would you order in a restaurant?*

*How would you approach me, out there? With hollow promises? With roses? With a blade and a steady hand?*

And when I saw him two hours later during the Resources block, I posed not a one of those questions. He found an empty seat, sitting patiently. I lost my nerve and avoided him. Kept allowing my eye to be caught by another attendee, putting him off. But with only twenty minutes left before my day ended, I couldn't ignore him any longer. I crossed the room, chair rolling before me.

"Hello again," I offered, stopping but not sitting. "Sorry for the wait. Ready to chat?"

He tapped the butt of a golf pencil against the table. "If you got the time."

"I've got a little." I took a seat across from him, wondering how close our shoes were to touching.

"So about that machine you gave me—I appreciate it, but I don't type right." He air-pecked with two fingers.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I bet half of college grads don't type with more than two or three fingers. Just get in the habit of practicing. Typing something every day."

"Typing what?"

"Anything you like."

He shot me a smile, one that cut the tether from the tenuous hold I'd gotten on my role and sent my focus crashing to the floor. I watched his lips as he spoke.

"I've been gettin' told exactly what to do, and when and where and how quick, for almost five years. You tell me what to write or I won't even know how to start."

"Oh, all right." *Five years. For what?* "Well, if you need an assignment, you could spend say, twenty minutes each night, typing up what happened to you that day. Don't worry about punctuation, and the word processor will fix most of the capitalization and spelling issues. Just get your fingers and eyes used to finding the letters. Work on that first, and maybe in time we'll get a plan together to start tackling your longhand. It's a tricky thing, dysgraphia. Didn't sound like you got much help in school for it."

He shook his head. "No one ever said I have that—they said I had dyslexia."

"They differ a fair bit. Dyslexia is often an issue with perception—people will have trouble reading

because the letters seem to move, or rearrange themselves.”

“Not for me they don’t.”

“Right. But when you try to write, your fingers can’t remember how to form each letter?”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

“But you have no trouble copying?”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t have made it to tenth grade without plagiarism.”

I smiled too, grimly. “Gotcha. Well, it’s never too late to start. Do what I said—try typing for twenty minutes each night. You might be surprised how much quicker you are with it by next week. Meet with me again and we’ll figure out what comes next.”

I gave him some dysgraphia fact sheets and handouts I’d photocopied.

“Thanks. Now can you, uh . . . Can you help me write a letter? To somebody?” He said it almost primly, humility in his voice. It struck me as odd, considering this man had asked me for help, and been offered it without judgment. Then he added in a near mumble, “A personal letter.”

The request was legit, a common one during Resources. I checked the clock. “We can start, at least. But I’ve only got ten minutes.”

He nodded. “You got paper?”

I pulled a notebook from my bag—perfect bound, not spiral, thanks to the thrilling array of deadly implements that can apparently be fashioned from three feet of steel wire. As he handed me the pencil, our fingertips brushed for the thinnest moment—quick and hot as a static shock.

“All righty. Shoot.”

“Darling,” Collier began, only loud enough for me to hear. His gaze jumped up to pin mine. “That’s how it should start.”

*Darling*, I wrote. My stomach soured, and even I wasn’t deluded enough to pretend I didn’t know why. Fuck me, I was penning a love letter to his frigging . . . who knew what. Wife? Girlfriend? Ex? Stalkee? Fine. If this didn’t get me over my stupid infatuation, nothing would. I eyed his arm, but his sleeve covered the tattoo I’d spotted from the office window. Whose name might be hiding under

there . . . ? *Get a grip.*

“Go on,” I said.

“I missed you since your last visit.” He watched my hand as he spoke, as his words took shape, drawn by my fingers with an ease he’d likely never know, himself. The act felt strangely, intensely intimate.

“A few minutes a week with you is almost more cruel than it’s worth,” he continued. “I miss—”

“Hang on.” I scribbled, catching up. I sensed his posture tighten with annoyance or impatience, and I couldn’t blame him. I was a stranger, after all, being asked to transcribe his feelings in a place where emotions were as dangerous to bare as pulse points.

“Okay, go on.”

“I miss you every minute we’re apart. And I watch the clock every morning when I think I might be seeing you again.” He paused, waiting until my hand did the same. “I miss how you smell. Like spring and grass. There’s not much grass here. I miss your face . . . And the way you smile sometimes. I want to make you smile like that.”

I ignored my jealousy, that hot snake twisting in my belly as I imagined such things. “Okay.”

“I miss your voice. The way you talk.”

*I like the way you talk. Where you from?*

The snake slowed. Changed direction, coiling low.

“I wish I could see you, away from here.” He put his forearms on the desk, leaning closer, speaking even more quietly. “I wish we could be together . . . in ways I haven’t been with a woman in five years. Sometimes, when I see you . . . Sometimes I can’t even listen to what you’re saying. All I can do is watch your mouth. I watch your lips and I think about kissing you, when I’m alone at night. Though I’m never really alone here. But I imagine I am—alone with just you. I think about your mouth, and about kissing you. And other things.”

. . . *other things*, my hand echoed. My neck was hot—hot like sunburn. My cheeks stung. My loose clothes bound me.

“Sometimes I watch your hands,” he went on. Watching my hands. “I watch your hands and imagine them . . . on me.”

I was trembling, and surely he could see it. His words had turned jagged, pencil pinched between my bloodless fingers.

“I imagine—”

“I think we better leave it there,” I breathed.

“We’ve got three more minutes still.”

“Yes, but this is getting . . . I’m not sure it’s appropriate that I write this sort of letter for you.” *And I’m not sure it’s appropriate how wet it’s making me. Not sure at all.*

“Right. Well, I guess that’s just about what I wanted to say, anyhow.”

“Good. I . . . I could have it mailed for you. If you have her address.”

That dark gaze jumped from my hands to my eyes and I flinched, too much heat going too many places. For a moment he just stared—not cold, not mean, just . . . *telling*.

“I don’t know her address,” he said quietly.

I shivered. My hands felt icy, my throat tight. My belly warm and heavy and damning.

His attention dropped to my hands. “Maybe you could hang on to that for me. Until I can remember.”

“I can leave it with you.” I tore the page carefully along the perforation, but he was shaking his head.

“You hang on to it,” he repeated. “It’s real personal stuff. Man doesn’t want just anybody reading those kinds of thoughts.”

I lowered the page, saw it fluttering in my quaking hand and closed it in the notebook. “Fine.”

“I didn’t get to sign it.”

“Oh.”

He nodded to the pad, raised his eyebrows. I submitted, pushing the page and the pencil across the tabletop. It was my turn to watch his hand as it formed two short, slow, careful words. Then he slid everything back.

“Thanks . . .” His eyes dropped to my chest, but it was my ID badge he scanned, not my breasts. “Annie.” He said it low, made more of breath than sound, as if he were telling himself a secret.

*Ms. Goodhouse*, I should’ve said, but the only correction I managed was, “Anne.” My parents called me Annie, and my aunts and grandparents and a couple of close friends, but that was all. Not strangers. Not this man whose first name I didn’t even know. Whose crimes I didn’t wish to hear about. Whose desires I’d just traced with shaking fingers. “I’ll see you next week.”

And he was gone, long legs striding for the door. This time he didn’t look back.

I tucked the letter away in my bag, not daring to see what he’d written.

*I won’t look. I’ll keep it closed in this notebook and not read it, and if next week we speak and he doesn’t have an address, I’ll throw it out. I’ll burn it. I’ll do whatever—anything except read it.*

I read it in my car.

My butt met the driver’s seat, my hands went to my bag, and I slid the page out, fingers shaking.

*Darling,*

*I missed you since our last visit. A few minutes a week with you is almost more cruel than it’s worth.*

*I miss you every minute we’re apart, and watch the clock every morning when I think I might be seeing you again. I miss how you smell, like spring and grass. There’s not much grass here.*

*I miss your face, and the way you smile sometimes. I want to make you smile like that. I miss your voice. The way you talk. I wish I could see you, away from here.*

*I wish we could be together, in ways I haven’t been with a woman in five years. Sometimes, when I see you . . . Sometimes I can’t even listen to what you’re saying. All I can do is watch your mouth. I watch your lips and I think about kissing you when I’m alone at night. Though I’m never really alone, here. But I imagine I am. Alone with just you. I think about your mouth, and about kissing you. And other things. Sometimes I*

*watch your hands. I watch your hands and imagine them on me.*

*Yours,*

*Eric*

\* \* \*

I thought about terrible things, that night.

About a slim iron bed frame, and a man's long, strong body laying atop threadbare covers in the heat of summer. About the waistband of prison-issue pajamas, pushed down by a big, tanned hand to expose an erection—thick, flushed, ready.

A fist stroking slowly to start, then quicker. Rougher.

And that face. Handsome features pained, dark eyes shut.

For the first time in months, my own hand slid low. Me and my hand in my lonely bed, in my lonely room, on this lonely night . . . wondering if a man was thinking of me and doing the same twenty miles away.

*Though I'm never really alone, here.*

How did that work, I wondered, hitting Pause on the scene. Were convicts discreet, to keep from pissing off their cellmates, or did a man just do what he had to do, and so did everyone else, so who cared? The former, I hoped, preferring the civility of it. Or perhaps the desperation of it. Of Eric Collier stifling his moans and grunts, tensing his body to keep his motions subtle. Of his lips forming two soundless syllables.

*Annie.*

He'd be thinking about things he couldn't give himself. *Ways I haven't been with a woman in five years.* The wet heat of a hungry mouth. The wet heat of my . . . which word would be use? *Pussy*, probably. Or *cunt*. Yes, cunt. Blunt and ugly, to match his world. I'd flinch if he said it to me, and wasn't that what I wanted, really? No candy coating to sweeten the things he said. All burrs and sharp edges, coming off the smooth slickness of his tongue. His tongue. Did he miss how a woman tasted, after all this time? Would he want to do that, or would he be selfish, concerned only with what I could offer his cock?

*Annie*, he'd whisper.

And I'd murmur, *Yes?*

He'd say, he'd say . . . He'd say, *Lemme taste you. It's been so long. Lemme kiss you. Down there.*

Would he even ask permission? Maybe it would be all needy grasping and bossy hands. No requests, no coy "down there."

*On your back. I gotta taste your cunt.*

A fever broke out all over my body. I imagined the same happening to him, two towns over in the human kennel he got locked in every night. He'd escape for just a few moments, in thoughts of me. Of us, together.

The twitching of his hand, the buck of his hips. He'd yank his tee shirt up from his waist, expose the taut, flexed muscles of his abdomen. His fist would race, and—

I jumped as my phone came to life, shimmying on the glass side table next to my bed. My hand flew out of the boxers I slept in and I fumbled for the device. *Mom cell.*

I hit Decline. It wasn't late enough to be an emergency, and I couldn't just go from masturbating over a convicted felon to chatting about what was blooming in her and Daddy's garden. I couldn't go from imagining my name on Collier's breath to hearing it in my mother's chirpy voice.

*Tomorrow*, I thought, and shut the thing off. And I went back to my fantasizing, back to gruff words and warm breaths, a starving man's hungry mouth, approximated by my own fingers. There was nothing else, not tonight. The real world could wait.